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SUBJECT: RUSSIAN MFA ON PUTIN-SAAKASHVILI TALKS

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Classified By: A/POL Bruce Donahue. Reason 1.4 (b, d)

¶1. (C) Summary: The Russian MFA notetaker at the June 13 meeting between Presidents Putin and Saakashvili said the discussion was a constructive start to dialogue. He stressed several times that Russia was not a party to any of the frozen conflicts, and that it was the South Ossetians and Abkhaz with whom the Georgians needed patiently and peacefully to work out agreements. The GOR believes, however, that Georgia is intent upon military action in South Ossetia. The MFA official noted that unresolved conflicts could complicate Georgia's bid to join NATO. End Summary.

¶2. (C) MFA Fourth CIS Department Deputy Director Dmitriy Tarabrin gave us a readout June 19 of the June 13 meeting between Putin and Saakashvili, at which Tarabrin was the Russian notetaker. Tarabrin, a 38-year veteran of the Soviet and Russian foreign ministries, spent most of his career working on France and Western Europe. He became deputy for on Caucasus conflicts and regional issues only six months ago and will act as director of the Georgia office as well for at least four months. He confined his readout to sketchy generalities and platitudes. Russian participants in the Putin-Sakashvili meeting were President Putin, FM Sergey Lavrov, Presidential Foreign Policy Advisor Sergey Prikhodko and Tarabrin; on the Georgian side were President Saakashvili, FM Gela Bezhushvili, Amb. Irakli Chubinashvili and, taking notes, Presidential Assistant Nato Kancheli.

¶3. (C) Tarabrin said the meeting was constructive, the conversation frank but polite. Putin led off by deplored the current state of Russian-Georgian relations. Saakashvili responded that Georgia wanted a good neighbor to the north, not "the sea" (i.e., open space). Putin answered with a list of ways in which Russia was helping Georgia: as Georgia's main trading partner, chief energy supplier, origin of USD 1.5 to 2 billion in remittances to Georgia, and participant in restructuring Georgia's international debt.

¶4. (C) Saakashvili's main agenda item was frozen conflicts, Tarabrin said. Most of the discussion was focused on South Ossetia, with Abkhazia mentioned only briefly. Saakashvili maintained that the territorial integrity of Georgia was his main concern. If this issue were resolved, all others would fall into place. Putin responded that Russia supported the principle of territorial integrity. However, there was another principle: self-determination. Any solution would be a combination of the two principles. Putin called for patience. "You Georgians want to settle everything all at once," he said. Instead, Putin counseled taking things step by step.

¶5. (C) Tarabrin said Saakashvili maintained Georgia would grant South Ossetia broad autonomy. Tarabrin added, however, that public Russian support at this point for Georgian territorial integrity and South Ossetian autonomy within

Georgia would create big internal problems for Russia. North Caucasians would consider such a statement a betrayal. Rather, Tarabrin stressed, Russia was not a party to the conflict. Only Georgia and South Ossetia were parties to the conflict, and Russia's role was to help resolve their differences. Putin, he said, had stressed to Saakashvili that existing mechanisms were adequate for that task. The first step must necessarily be the acceptance of a joint statement on non-use of force to resolve the dispute. This was needed to create an atmosphere of confidence.

¶ 6. (C) To Saakashvili's protests against Russian annexationist policies Putin gave assurances that Russia had no claims on Georgian territory. The key to resolution, Putin reiterated, was patience and renunciation of force. Tarabrin added that the Russian MFA -- and the "other" agencies that followed the issue -- believed with absolute certainty that Georgia was intent upon military action in South Ossetia. He stressed again that Russia is not a party to the conflict and that Georgia and South Ossetia must resolve the dispute between themselves.

¶ 7. (C) Tarabrin said that the same held true for Abkhazia. The Coordinating Council had set up three groups to work on non-use of force, economic rehabilitation, and return of the civilian population. Regrettably, these groups had not met. We noted that Georgia was requesting an international civilian police contingent to protect the returning civilian population in Gali. Tarabrin said this was a matter between Abkhazia and Georgia. Criminality was rife, and the CIS PKF had begun escorting farmers to market, though this was not part of its mandate. We reiterated that a permanent solution needed to be put in place, and Russia should support a CivPol force. Tarabrin reiterated that the matter was for

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discussion between the Abkhaz and Georgians. If the Abkhaz accepted such a force, why should Russia object? We noted that Russia had great influence with the Abkhaz that it could use to promote the idea. Tarabrin replied that there was good contact between Georgian negotiator Alasania and Abkhaz leader Bagapsh; the dialogue must be allowed to work.

¶ 8. (C) Tarabrin summed up the meeting as a constructive beginning to a dialogue to create a new atmosphere. He maintained that Saakashvili, like Putin, understood that one meeting could not resolve all outstanding issues between Russia and Georgia. For example, when Putin pressed Saakashvili on a counter-terrorism center agreed in the context of base withdrawals, Saakashvili replied that he was not against it, but the atmosphere was not yet ripe for such a move. (Note: Tarabrin did not mention that Saakashvili agreed to take action to resettle the Meskhetian Turks, and shook hands with Putin on it. End Note.)

¶ 9. (C) We noted to Tarabrin that some Georgians have concluded that Russia would not help resolve the frozen conflicts as long as Georgia maintained its aspirations to join NATO. Tarabrin professed that Russian policy had no objections to any country choosing its alliances, and believed that Georgia would be given a MAP after the Riga Summit. But, he said, the persistence of unresolved conflicts would surely make Georgia's NATO accession difficult "from an objective point of view." Exactly so, we pointed out. Russia might therefore find unresolved conflicts useful. Tarabrin strenuously denied that. "That is not the aim of our policy," he maintained. "It is our desire to have all those problems resolved. The permanent conservation of frozen conflicts on our frontiers is not in our interests."

Comment

¶ 10. (C) Most Russian official interlocutors used to stress that Russia was key to the resolution of the frozen

conflicts. Now, however, there is a new line -- stressed by Tarabrin and apparently by Putin as well: Russia is not involved and has no effective levers to influence the separatists, but will oppose Georgia if -- as the GOR expects -- Georgia resorts to military means. Saakashvili and Bezhuaashvili (refs a and b) apparently concluded from the meeting that Georgia's NATO ambitions are the factor driving Russia's reluctance to resolve the frozen conflicts, implying a possible trade-off -- as indeed FM Lavrov hinted at the meeting, according to Georgian Ambassador Chubinishvili.

Chubinishvili stressed, however, that Putin made no proposals and had no suggestions for the Georgians. Chubinishvili instead got the strong impression that Putin understands that the current Georgian government will not trade away its NATO ambitions and knows there is no point in proposing a trade. Rather, Chubinishvili believes, Putin fully expects Georgia to resort to military force in South Ossetia, and is concentrating on a strong Russian reaction to that challenge, without regard for the consequences to Georgia.

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